

UNCLASSIFIED

STATEMENT BY

MAJOR GENERAL WILLIAM D. WOFFORD

THE ADJUTANT GENERAL

ARKANSAS NATIONAL GUARD

BEFORE THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

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ON

EDUCATION BENEFITS FOR

THE NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVES

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Chairwoman Herseth, distinguished members of the Committee, I am Major General William D. Wofford, The Adjutant General, Arkansas National Guard. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today on education benefits for National Guard and Reserve members.

Civilian education benefits are an integral part of our efforts to maintain a viable force to meet mission requirements. Individuals normally join the military for one of five reasons: Training, Education, Adventure, Money, or Service to Country. My recruiting force indicates that education benefits are the primary reason why individuals join the Arkansas National Guard.

The Arkansas National Guard has mobilized over 85 percent of our total force since September 11, 2001. The Cold War strategic reserve, for which the National Guard and Army Reserve have been organized and resourced for, has evolved into an operational force that supports the active military every day. The increase in service and sacrifice of our members should be met with equitable benefits as their active components counterparts.

I will focus my testimony primarily on GI Bill benefits and share a few brief stories.

My first story is about a young man that served four years in the Army in the early 1970s. Even though this was during the Vietnam era, this young man was not called upon to serve in combat. After departing from the Army, this individual continued his civilian education using his GI Bill to further his career.

The second story is about a young man that volunteered to serve in the Marine Corps and ended up serving one year in Vietnam with the First Marine Division. A few years later, this individual returned to college and completed his last two years of his undergraduate degree and three years of medical school by using his Montgomery GI Bill benefits.

I also want to tell you about a third young man who followed in his father's footsteps by joining the National Guard. Three years ago, a major mobilization of National Guard units occurred within the state and he was "crossleveled" from his unit into a position vacancy in the deploying unit. He went to the mobilization station, trained with his new unit, and deployed to Iraq for twelve months. He returned home and to his original unit in March 2005. Four months after returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom, his own unit was mobilized. He was not required or expected to return to combat – especially that soon after coming

home. But he chose to go with his unit, as he said: "This is my unit. These are my friends that I initially joined the Guard with. I cannot let them go into combat without me." Ladies and gentlemen, those are the kinds of great Americans that we have serving today both on active duty and in the reserve components. I am extremely proud to be able to say that young man is an Arkansas Guardsman.

Our Guard and Reserve members are called upon more than ever to serve this great nation while continuing to serve the needs of their states. Over 8,500 men and women of the Arkansas National Guard have been deployed in support of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Approximately 2,000 of our members have volunteered to serve in GWOT operations on more than one rotation. Several hundred served for an extended period of time in support of Operation Hurricane Katrina. Arkansas also currently has over 250 serving on the Southwest Border mission in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. Our state was recently hit by a devastating tornado and over 150 members of the Guard were called upon to provide support to the community of Dumas, AR.

Service to our country has not just increased for the National Guard. Each quarter, a Community Council meeting is conducted at Camp Robinson/Camp Pike in North Little Rock, AR. Camp Robinson is the headquarters of the Arkansas National Guard, while Camp Pike is the location for a Regional Readiness Command for the U.S. Army Reserve, and also the Marine Corps and Naval Reserve Center in Arkansas. One of the purposes of the Community

Council is to provide awareness of the military to our civic and business leaders in Central Arkansas. During each meeting, the Guard and Reserve provide updates on their deploying and/or returning units. The civilians in the audience are not just local civic and business leaders; they are employers of our Guard and Reserve members. Some of the employers are prior service members, but many are not. Regardless of whether or not they have previous military experience, they see the sacrifices being made by our Reserve Component members and their families. These business men and women are also sacrificing while their employees are deployed, yet they continue to stand ready to support any way they can.

I do not want to imply that the Guard and Reserve are doing more than Active Component members. However, I would like to make note that at this time, equal service does not provide equal benefits when it comes to the GI Bill. In 1985, Reserve Component members were eligible for GI benefits that equated to 47 cents to the dollar of what their Active Component counterparts were entitled. Today, that ratio only equates to 29 cents to the dollar.

Our Active Component counterparts are able to continue their GI Bill benefits after they are discharged from active service. Guard and Reserve members are only able to utilize GI Bill benefits while an active member of the Guard or Reserve. Regardless of the number of years of service and regardless of the number of times a Guard or Reserve member has been placed in harm's way in

service to their country, they are not eligible for GI Bill benefits following their discharge.

Occasionally, my office receives inquiries from parents asking why their son or daughter, that is a former member of the Arkansas National Guard and that served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, is not eligible for GI Bill benefits. I honestly do not have a good answer for them. In the end, we've lost the support of those parents and most likely we will not see their son or daughter re-enlist with us in the future.

I understand that the GI Bill for the Guard and Reserve is not only a recruiting incentive, but also a retention tool. If a Guard member wants to use the GI Bill, they must maintain their membership. I agree that we could possibly see a decrease in the GI Bill being a retention tool if eligibility is extended after a member is discharged. However, I would like for us to think (as an example) about the shortage of junior officers that most Guard and Reserve forces are faced with at present time. One of the requirements before an officer can be promoted to the rank of Captain (in the Guard) is to have a four year, college degree. It is difficult to juggle college, civilian career, family, and also your Guard or Reserve membership. In many cases, we are losing some of our best and brightest because they are unable to meet all the demands of their young life.

I believe that if the GI Bill were received based on equal benefit for equal service, then we would see some of our prior service members returning to us with college degrees and some returning to us as junior officers.

In closing, I would like to return to the three stories I shared with you earlier. The first two young men used their GI Bill to further their civilian education after leaving active military service. Even though he had not served in combat during his active duty tour, the first man furthered his education and later joined the Arkansas National Guard. He served as a battalion commander during Desert Storm and in various leadership positions throughout his 36 years of service. That individual is me.

The second individual that continued his civilian education by using his GI Bill after he left the military, earned his four year degree, a medical doctorate, and later a law degree. This individual has served our state and nation proudly since 1996 as a Member of Congress. That individual is your colleague and my Congressman, the Honorable Vic Snyder.

The third individual that I mentioned is Staff Sergeant (SSG) Jason Bowen of Battery B, 1st Battalion, 142nd Field Artillery, Arkansas Army National Guard. As I mentioned earlier, he was transferred from his unit in northwest Arkansas to fill a vacancy within the 39th Brigade Combat Team that mobilized and deployed to Iraq, returning in March 2005. In August 2005, he again left his family and once

again placed his civilian career on hold to do what he thought was right for his fellow Soldiers and for his country. I am thrilled to share with you that SSG Bowen is back home with his family again after having spent a total of 24 months in combat within the past three years. Now for the rest of this story, SSG Bowen has decided that he would like to get out of the National Guard so that he can pursue a civilian career without further interruption. I think it is extremely unfair that by getting out of the Guard he will lose his GI Bill education benefits, unlike the active component soldiers that he served with, side-by-side, during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The disparity in benefits is difficult to understand and cannot be satisfactorily explained to our Guardsmen, their families, or to me.

I do not have all the answers of how to make the GI Bill more equitable. I do not know the cost of the proposed changes to the GI Bill. I can speak from my own personal experience of the opportunities the GI Bill gave in my life. On a larger scale, I think our communities would benefit as there would be an increase in higher educated members of our society. And in the long run, I think the military could possibly see prior service members returning to the military with a higher level of civilian education.

I thank the Committee for your hard work and dedication to our country and your continued support of our Armed Forces.

This concludes my testimony. I look forward to your questions.